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ABSTRACT

Behavioral development among adults is viewed from a life-span perspective. Derived from sociological literature, a life-span perspective is interpreted as a conceptualization of achievement associated with success and failure in school and in the world of work. Remarks are organized around the question of whether achievement in adults' world of work can be foretold in the scholastic achievement of childhood and adolescence. Data are taken from research on social inequality and mobility. The most pertinent concerns in that literature are to describe and explain the processes that allocate people to hierarchically ranked social positions throughout their lives. Patterns of continuity and discontinuity from one generation to another, one individual to another, and with regard to one individual across the life span are indicated by many factors including IQ tests, peer recognition, earnings, occupational status, and social standing. Findings from a review of recent literature by sociologists including O.D. Duncan, G.H. Elder, D.L. Featherman, R.A. Van Dusen, and H. Winsborough indicate that there is an overall trend toward greater continuity between the scholastic achievement of youth and the occupational and economic attainments of adults. Additional research is suggested on the sequence of institutional contexts--the home, school, and work/economy--in which achievement behavior takes place across the life cycle. (DB)

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Implications of the Socioeconomic Life Cycle for a Life-Span Conception of Adult Human Development

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Implications of the Socioeconomic Life Cycle

ABSTRACT

Elaboration of a life-span perspective of behavioral development within psychology has broadened the intellectual scope of that discipline. This in turn has fostered greater opportunities for conceptual cross-fertilization and research collaboration across disciplinary lines in the social and behavioral sciences. Current research in American sociology on the socioeconomic life cycle and social inequality is used to illustrate how a sociological perspective of the life course enriches an emerging understanding of continuities as well as changes in behavior throughout the life course.

A life-course or life-span perspective on behavioral development has longstanding historical roots in psychology (Baltes, 1979), but other behavioral sciences also have studied patterns of continuity and change in human development from conception to death. My own discipline of sociology shares in the recent renaissance of interest in behavioral development after childhood that has stimulated some to seek a multidisciplinary model to account for age-related behaviors over the full course of life (e.g., Riley, 1973, 1979; Elder, 1975). Whether such syncretic models can achieve a fruitful synthesis of the wide array of conceptual distinctions and research strategies among the social and behavioral sciences is open to debate (Winsborough, 1979). Nevertheless, while it may be impossible to formulate a multidisciplinary theory or single unified perspective of behavioral development, students of this topic can learn a great deal from the concepts and findings of their counterparts in sister disciplines. In this brief presentation I want to illustrate how a sociological perspective on human development contributes to the broadening scientific interests in aging and development.

To focus my remarks I address the question: Can the achievements in adults' world of work be foretold in the scholastic achievement of childhood and adolescence? Thus, I shall illustrate my sociological perspective of behavioral development from research on social inequality and mobility (Featherman, 1979a). In that literature, the pertinent concerns are to describe and explain the processes that allocate persons to hierarchically ranked social positions

throughout their lives. These positions may entail differentials in power, prestige, money, social class, and the like. The allocative processes that distribute people across social positions are both intragenerational--involving social mobility within one's own lifetime as an independent adult--and intergenerational. The latter processes refer to continuities and changes in social estate in relation to one's family of socialization. Such processes call attention to the degree of dependence of achievement in the filial generation on those in the parental generation. One can easily find in this sociological literature on achievement a life-span perspective--a conceptualization of achievement that sometimes is called the socioeconomic life cycle (Duncan, 1967; Featherman, 1979a).

My focus on the socioeconomic life cycle is limited to behaviors associated with success and failure in school and in the world of work. Achievement, as I define it for these purposes, involves social evaluation of performances and attainments--that is, evaluations and attributions made by peers about ego's behavior; I have not considered the equally interesting topic of subjective achievements. My concern with self-evaluations and personal goals is limited to those that are shared with a comparison group. An extension of this limitation of interest to objective or socially recognized achievements is my attention to but one kind of change across the life span; namely, change in interindividual differences. Thus the issue of relative continuity and change in achievement across the life span, and between generations, becomes the following by way of illustration: Are the scholastic achievements of an adolescent, relative to his or her

peers, predictive of the relative earnings or the social standing of successive jobs of this person vis-à-vis peers in later life?

In my summary remarks this evening I want to illustrate how the research literature on the socioeconomic life cycle--mainly in the U.S. but also to some lesser extent abroad--reflects many of the same themes about human development that I have come to learn are basic to the growing field of life-span developmental psychology (Baltes and Goulet, 1970; Baltes et al., 1980). That is, it is quite evident that the developmental course of achievement behaviors is responsive to many causes, proceeds in many directions, is both continuous and discontinuous, and entails greater interindividual differences as it unfolds. In addition, this complex pattern of achievement throughout the life course is generated by age-graded events, cohort-forming events, as well as "idiosyncratic" events in each individual's life (Baltes et al., 1980). As such, discontinuities in achievement from one phase of life to the next are to be as expected as continuities. And, patterns of continuity and discontinuity in achievement are historically variable. Let me now illustrate.

The strongest continuities in achievement between the parental and filial generations is in performances on standardized IQ tests. My sociologist's frame of reference conceives of IQ as the ability to do school work. An IQ score is, among other things, a performance on an achievement task (elaborate in discussion). Interindividual differences in IQ tend to asymtote between ages 8-10; thereafter, inequality (but not necessarily plasticity) in this form of scholastic

achievement remains very constant (r = .9) through adolescence. Whether it does so thereafter is not well established (Schaie, 1979). Neither are the reasons for this developmental pattern well understood--it may reflect measurement error, lagged genetic effects, age-graded school environments or all of these. The parent-child or intergenerational correlation of IQ is roughly 0.5; but the intergenerational discontinuity in this form of achievement is large. Regressing IQ scores on a large set of social background characteristics yields an $R^2 < .5$ (Featherman, 1979a).

Other scholastic achievements (e.g., grades in courses, grade point average, teacher evaluations, years of school completed) and attainments in the world of work (e.g., earnings) are less connected to the similar social achievements of the parental generation than is IQ. The life-cycle pattern is one of greater attenuation or discontinuity as the filial generation ages. In addition, secular trend or social change across the experiences of successive birth cohorts of Americans (and perhaps elsewhere) appears to be weakening these linkages even further. Take for example the length of formal schooling--years completed. The major predictor of length of schooling is not parental social "class" but son's or daughter's IQ. Taken in conjunction with a long list of indicators of social background, educational aspirations, significant other influences on school plans, IQ and GPA explain about 70% of educational differences among individuals (Featherman, 1979a). Interestingly, the net effects of parental characteristics are effectively zero in these expanded models. And, across successive birth cohorts

of at least American men, these associations of social background (e.g., race, class, farm origins) are getting weaker (Featherman and Hauser, 1978). At least this is so for education through grade 12. In a major respect, this declining persistence of achievement from generation to generation stems from secular change in the distribution of schooling--in the lower tail. Perhaps this reflects a legacy of industrialization and child labor laws. In any case, historical change has altered the intergenerational pattern of continuity and change in scholastic achievement.

Turning to occupations and careers one finds, at least for the U.S., secular declines in the predictability of achievement from the attainments of parents and associated aspects of social background. But unlike the situation for length of schooling, this trend toward greater discontinuity in socioeconomic achievement is not connected to overall reductions in occupational inequality--in the distribution of the "statuses" of jobs on some scale of social standing or income. Rather, it seems to arise from the substitution of formal education for social class or background as the means of access to better jobs or careers. Obversely, the continuity between achievement in school and at work has gained, especially the relative economic value of higher education (Featherman and Hauser, 1978).

Explaining the overall trend toward greater continuity between the scholastic achievements of youths and the occupational and economic attainments of adults is problematic. Whether it reflects greater valuation of higher education in post-industrial society,

the effects of "credentialism" in the allocation of workers to slots in the economy, or both is not known from available research (Featherman and Hauser, 1978; Featherman, 1979a).

There are some major exceptions to this historical trend. One involves black workers, for whom intergenerational continuities of achievement--modest though they are for Americans overall--are just now beginning to approximate the pattern that has been typical in white families (Featherman and Hauser, 1978). Another exception involves young white males under age 35 in the mid-1970s. For these men, the economic value of higher education seemed to have fallen as they took their first jobs. Based on recent analyses, it is possible to interpret such a cohort pattern as a temporary aberration that stemmed from a unique confluence of demographic, economic, and historical events (unprecedented cohort size, downturn in federal expenditures for research and development, and the effects of the Vietnam military draft on school attendance patterns; see Featherman and Hauser, 1978). But the important point for our consideration of life-time continuities in achievement and their vulnerability to historical and social change is that this unique confluence may have cost the college class of 1974 in the U.S. about 10% of its life-time earnings (Welch, 1979).

This brings me to a final illustration, in which the normative features of the age-graded life cycle are linked to achievement patterns. In speaking of an age-graded life cycle I mean that for any given birth cohort there is a statistically normative age profile

to the entrance into and exit from the family of origin, school, work, and the family of procreation (Hogan, 1978). Whether such age-graded behaviors are socially normative--subject to positive/negative sanctioning--in addition to being statistically normative has yet to be firmly established. But there are consequences for achievement that ensue from deviations from the normative order and pace of life-cycle events. These effects are easiest to illustrate in contrasting the connections between jobs and schooling for American women with those of men. Secular trends in the American female life cycle during the 1970s have markedly changed the labor force participation of women in the prime marital and childbearing ages--25 to 34. Whereas two decades ago only one-third of such women worked, today about 55% do. Seventy-five percent of women in that age bracket who do not have children are employed. Of course, over 90% of the men in these ages are in the labor force, and they tend to work with fewer interruptions and more frequently in full-time jobs. Thus, despite recent shifts that have rendered the female life cycle more like that of the male, the family cycle is still more integrally related to the socioeconomic life cycle of females than males (Van Dusen and Sheldon, 1976). What are the consequences for achievement? Relative to males, working women tend to experience more downward social mobility as they have their families and find their own careers. They acquire less job experience at each age than men, making job-to-job moves less predictable and less conditional on job characteristics than for men. There is less

continuity of occupational achievement for women. In addition, the connection of schooling to successive jobs differs. For men, the direct influence of formal schooling on jobs is greatest at career beginnings (i.e., first job). It declines thereafter as experience and on-the-job training become more important for subsequent career moves. For women, however, formal schooling retains importance as the major access to subsequent jobs as women are forced to renegotiate for new jobs on the basis of their school credentials or formal training rather than on a stream of cumulative experience. Overall, however, the net effect is for less continuity between achievement in school and in work for women as a function of "deviant" age-grade patterns in their socioeconomic life cycle (Sewell et al., 1977; Featherman, 1979a, b).

To sum up, one can see in my research review that achievement behaviors across the life cycle take place in a sequence of institutional contexts--the home, school, work/economy. The age-graded features of this sequence give rise to the socioeconomic life cycle as one aspect of the general life course. Social changes in the connections between these institutions alter the pattern of continuity and change in human development, as do factors that independently may affect the sequence and pace of life-cycle transitions. In the case of achievement behaviors, especially for men, the drift of social change (institutional change) has been to lessen the possibility of continuity in interindividual differences from childhood through adulthood.

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